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## Consider the risk of offshore drilling

Before South Carolina invites the oil and gas industry to plant drilling rigs off its shoreline, state leaders need to consider the possible consequences along with the claimed benefits.

South Carolina has a tradition of opposing offshore drilling on its coastline out of concern that an oil spill would be disastrous for a tourist industry that provides one in 10 jobs in the state. In addition, studies over the years have indicated that there is little oil to be found off the state's coast.

Drilling proponents point to more recent studies suggesting that natural gas could be more prevalent in the offshore waters. The Interior Department recently endorsed seismic testing to find out how much oil and gas lies off the coast of the Carolinas and other Atlantic states, a key move toward allowing drilling for the first time in decades.

But some members of the state's congressional delegation don't want to wait for new studies. U.S. Sen. Tim Scott has introduced a Southern Energy Access Jobs Act, which would open the door to drilling. Fellow Republican Sen. Lindsey Graham, who used to oppose drilling off the state's coastline, has switched positions, saying he believes the oil and natural gas can help America gain energy independence.

U.S. Rep. Jeff Duncan, R-S.C., also has a bill in the House to open waters for drilling. And Gov. Nikki Haley is a leading proponent for offshore drilling in the Atlantic.

But at least three South Carolina mayors whose cities depend on tourism don't think the potential benefits of oil exploration are worth the risk. Drew Laughlin, mayor of Hilton Head, Billy Keyserling, mayor of Beaufort, and Joe Riley, mayor of Charleston, have spoken out against offshore drilling.

"Our beach and our environment are our signatures. Our entire economy is built on hospitality," Laughlin said.

The 2010 Deepwater Horizon drilling rig explosion that killed 11 and poured 200 million gallons of crude into the Gulf of Mexico should make any state reluctant to welcome offshore drilling to its coastline. Four years later, Gulf states still are coping with the devastation to wildlife, coastal inlets, beaches and fisheries caused by the spill.

It would be naive to ignore the possibility that a similar disaster could happen here. And it is equally naive to assume that drilling off the Carolina coastline is the answer to America's energy independence.

The U.S. already is exporting liquefied natural gas, which, because of fracking, now is abundant. Exploring for gas in the Atlantic would be more expensive than onshore and, in all likelihood, less productive as well.

We also shouldn't forget that the goal is not simply to continue to produce enough fossil fuel so that we never have to worry about having enough. The overriding goal should be to find ways to burn less oil, gas and coal, and to increase the use of cleaner alternative energy sources.

But whatever one's stance on offshore drilling, it makes no sense to pass legislation to allow exploration before testing has determined if any significant gas and oil reserves even exist off the Carolina coast.

As Mayor Riley noted, "our coastal zone is a part of the inheritance of every person in South Carolina." We shouldn't risk that inheritance lightly.